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ABSTRACT

Based on the completed interview schedules of 74 black and 34 white rural household heads (from an East Mississippi county) making less than $3,000 annually, the purpose of this study was to examine whether social participation of the impoverished may be correlated with the geographic mobility potential of household heads and their adult children. The extent of social participation was determined by assigning a numerical score to every social interaction beyond the nuclear family and each membership in a formal organization, from which an overall score was derived for each household head. Race was used as a control factor throughout the analysis. Srole's scale of anomie was utilized to determine the degree of social withdrawal among household heads. Results indicated impoverished household heads who had different levels of social participation did not differ significantly in the demographic, social, or economic factors nor in respect to participation levels, degree of anomie, or willingness to leave the community. But the children of impoverished parents who were participation inclined had significantly more formal education and moved significantly greater distances from their home of origin. (JC)

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CORRELATES OF SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND MOBILITY POTENTIALS AMONG RURAL LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

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Abstract

This study is based on the completed interview schedules of 74 black and 34 white rural household heads who earn less than $3,000 annually. The main purpose of this research was to examine whether social participation practices of the impoverished are associated with their mobility potentials. The objectives were to: describe the differences in social participation practices of household heads; identify their socio-economic characteristics; identify factors associated with their participation; and examine whether their participation is related to their or their childrens' mobility potentials.

Introduction

Factors generally found in sociological literature to be highly associated with the social participation practices of the non-poor should also be associated with the social participation practices of those who are living in poverty. Differences in education, income, home tenure status, and age of impoverished household heads should be related to their levels of social participation.[1] Moreover, according to research literature, impoverished male household heads should differ from female household heads in their social participation practices.[2]

In theory, levels of social participation of individuals are related to how they feel and think about their local community and society. Impoverished heads that participate little

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[1]Babchuk, Nicholas, and Booth, Alan. "Voluntary Association Membership: A Longitudinal Analysis." American Sociological Review, 34 (February 1969): 31-45.
Hyman, Herbert H., and Wright, Charles R.. "Trends in Voluntary Association Memberships of American Adults: Replication Based on Secondary Analysis of National Sample Surveys." American Sociological Review, 36 (April 1971): 191-206.
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[2]Hyman, op. cit.

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beyond the nuclear family should be the most anomic. They should feel marginal, helpless and dependent, and lack the ability to plan for the future.[3]

On the other hand, as impoverished heads become more participation directed beyond the nuclear family, they should become more cognizant of how their community and society are organized and operate. They should become increasingly aware that life in society is built around fundamental principles--principles which are, to a large degree, learned in formal settings. Therefore, by participating, they ought to become more informed and appreciative of the role which formal learning plays in helping determine life successes.[4]

Levels of participation of individuals should also be related to their willingness to leave their community of residence. When impoverished heads become more participation inclined and realize that social processes are generally the same everywhere, they should become increasingly wont to leave their community in order to improve their life chances.[5]

Thus, impoverished heads who are participation inclined should pass to their children their more optimistic values and knowledge about society. On the other hand, impoverished heads who are participation disinclined should pass on many of their values of fatalism and futility to their children.[6]

Consequently, children of poverty who have participation-inclined household head parents should acquire more formal learning and be less afraid to move to wherever greater opportunities in society exist. Such children of poverty should have a greater chance of succeeding in life because their parents have a greater mobility potential in that they are participation prone.

Rural families whose earnings were less than $3,000 per year have been examined in an East Mississippi county on several economic, social, and demographic factors. Both household heads and their adult children were included in this study.

The study's main objective has been to examine whether social participation practices are related to the mobility potential of rural impoverished household heads and their children.

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[3]Oscar Lewis, La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty - San Juan and New York (New York: Random House, 1966), p. xlvii.

[4]Ibid., p. xlv.

[5]Ibid., p. xlviii.

[6]Ibid., p. xlv.

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In order to investigate and measure the mobility potential of these subjects, two stages of analysis were followed. The first stage was concerned with: (a) ascertaining the differences in participation patterns of heads; (b) examining whether age, sex, education, income, and home tenure status--factors that have been found by other sociologists to be highly correlated with social participation practices--are correlated with differences in social participation of household heads; (c) examining if social participation patterns are associated with household heads levels of anomie; (d) investigating the association between household heads' social participation patterns and the possibility of their leaving the present community of residence.

In order to determine the extent of social participation of household heads, the following procedures were followed: (a) every social interaction that household heads had with others beyond the level of their isolated nuclear family was given a numerical score; (b) a numerical score was given for each membership the household head held in formal organizations; (c) an overall participation score for each household head was determined by combining all of his (or her) membership and participation scores.

Scores ranged from a low of five to a high of forty-nine. Heads were placed into three social participation categories (low, moderate, and high) depending on the magnitude of their overall participation scores. Those heads whose scores ranged from five through nineteen were placed into the category of low social participators. Heads with scores from twenty to thirty-four were placed into a second category of moderate participators. Finally, heads who had scores beyond thirty-four were placed into a high category of social participators.

A second aspect of the analysis was concerned with examining whether or not the social participation patterns of the household heads were associated with the educational and geographic mobility of their children. Only adult children--those over eighteen years of age--were examined.

Race was used as a control factor throughout the analysis. In order to test for the association between variables, Gamma was used in virtually all instances because it is suited for ordinal levels of measurement.[7]

The variables of age, education, income and home tenure status of household heads were categorized as follows:

Age	Less than Sixty
	Over Sixty

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[7]An exception occurred when sex was employed as an independent variable.

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Education	From zero to six years of education Seven or more years of education
Income	$ 0 - $ 999 $1,000 - $1,999 $2,000 - $2,999
Home Tenure Status	Owners Others (renters, tenant farmers, occupants whose rent is paid)[8]

Sroles scale of anomie was operationalized in the following manner. There are three possible responses to each of the five items asked of household heads concerning anomie: agree; don't know (a neutral, middle category); and disagree. Responses of agreement were weighed as a numerical unit of two. Responses of disagreement and don't know were weighed as one and zero respectively. Possible scores ranged from zero to ten. Anomie scores when computed, ranged from a low of zero to a high of nine. Respondents were divided into two groups with those scoring five or below being classified as low in anomie and those scoring six or above being classified as high in anomie.

Household heads had a choice of giving any one of three responses to the question of possibility of moving from the community: yes; do not know; and no. Heads were placed into one of these three response categories depending on how they answered the question.[9]

Findings

Household Head Parents

Although it was hypothesized that as the income of the household heads increased so would their level of social participation, the relationship did not prove to be significant. When race was introduced as a control variable, it was also found that the level of income did not significantly affect the level of social participation of either white or black household heads.

Similarly, the association between levels of education

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[8]Hereafter, in order to simplify discussion, "others" will be referred to as renters.

[9]These questions were used to measure anomie: nowdays a person has to live pretty much for today; in spite of what some people say, the lot of the average man is getting worse; it hardly seems fair to bring children into the world; these days a person doesn't know whom he can count on; there is no use writing to public officials because often they are not interested in the problem of the average man.

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and levels of participation of household heads was not found to be significant. Moreover, controlling for race (Negro and white) levels of education were not significantly related to the levels of participation of household heads.

Age of household head was not found to be significantly associated with level of social participation. However, the relationship that did exist proved to be a negative one. With race controlled for, the inverse relationship between age and participation proved insignificant for both Negroes and whites.

The relationship between home tenure status of household heads and their levels of social participation was found significant with or without the use of race as a control factor. Moreover, the relationship between sex of household heads and their social participation patterns was not found significant with or without the use of race as a control. An inverse relationship between levels of anomie of household heads and levels of social participation remained insignificant when controlling for race.

Finally, the question dealing with whether household heads might someday move from the community was not significantly related to their levels of social participation. Race, when introduced as a control variable, did not significantly change this relationship.

Adult Children[10]

Although the relationships between income, education, age, sex, home tenure status, geographic mobility potential, anomie, and social participation of household heads proved insignificant, this does not mean they are sociologically unimportant. In order to investigate whether these insignificant relationships are important, all adult children were examined in light of the social participation scores of their parents. This was done in order to test the assumption that poverty parents who are prone to participate beyond the level of the isolated family unit influence the amounts of education their children acquire and the geographic distances these children move from home.

To test the hypothesis between the levels of participation of parents and the levels of education their adult children have obtained, children were placed into five education categories: (a) zero to six years of education; (b) seven through nine years of education; (c) ten through eleven years of education; (d) high school graduate; and (e) education beyond high school.

The positive relationship between the levels of participation

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[10]Adult children in the study includes all children who are eighteen years of age or older.

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of household head parents and the levels of education of their adult children proved significant beyond the .001 level of probability. Furthermore, when race was introduced as a control, the relationship remained significant beyond the .01 level for Negro children and beyond the .001 for white children. (See Table 1).

To test the association between the levels of participation of parents and the geographic distances their children have moved from home, children were placed into four current residential categories. These categories are: (a) living in the same community as their parents; (b) living in another community in the same county as parents; (c) living in a different county in Mississippi; and (d) living in another state.

The levels of social participation of parents proved to be both positively and significantly related to the geographic distances children moved away from their parents' homes. The relationship was significant at the .001 level of probability. Moreover, when white children were examined with respect to the levels of participation of their parents and the distances they had moved from home, the relationship proved to be significant at the .001 level of probability. The relationship also proved to be significant for Negro children, but only at the .05 level of probability. (See Table 2).

Controlling for social participation of parents, the levels of education of children proved to be significantly and positively related to the geographic mobility of those children who had ten years of education or above. The significance of the relationship is at the .01 level of probability. However, the relationship between levels of education and geographic mobility of children, when social participation of parents was controlled, was not significant with regard to those children who had less than ten years of education. (See Table 3).

Sex as a Variant

Since more women than men live in urban areas and many of the females and males that live in urban areas come from rural backgrounds, the decision was made to use sex as a control factor when testing the relationship between levels of participation of childrens' parents and the distances these children have moved away from home.

The results showed a significant, positive relationship between the level of social participation of the parents of male children and the distances these males had moved from home. This relationship was significant at the .05 level of probability. Moreover, a positive relationship was more significant for the level of social participation of parents of female children and the distances these females had moved away from their parents' homes. The relationship was significant at the .01 level.

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TABLE 1

Years of School of Children Over 18 Years Old by Race and Social Participation of Parents

Years of School of Children Over 18 Years Old	Negroes and Whites								Race: Negroes								Race: Whites							
	Level of Social Participation of the Parents																							
	Low		Moderate		High		Total		Low		Moderate		High		Total		Low		Moderate		High		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
From Zero Thru Six Years of Education	18	17	32	18	13	11	63	15	14	19	22	19	13	20	49	19	4	11	10	17	0	0	14	9
From Seven Thru Nine Years of Education	35	32	46	26	12	10	93	23	22	30	38	32	7	11	67	26	13	36	8	13	5	9	26	17
From Ten Thru Eleven Years of Education	18	17	19	10	16	13	53	13	16	22	16	13	11	16	43	17	2	6	3	5	5	9	10	7
High School Graduate	29	26	52	29	54	45	135	33	16	22	33	28	27	41	76	29	13	36	19	32	27	50	59	39
Schooling Beyond High School	9	8	30	17	25	21	64	16	5	7	10	8	8	12	23	9	4	11	20	33	17	32	41	28
Total	109	100	179	100	120	100	408	100	73	100	119	100	66	100	258	100	36	100	60	100	54	100	150	100
	4 No Information on Education								4 No Information on Education															

Gamma = .2568
Z = 4.7417
P < .001

Gamma = .1599
Z = 2.3314
P < .01

Gamma = .3296
Z = 3.5273
P < .001

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TABLE 2

Geographic Mobility of Children Over 18 Years Old by Race and Social Participation of Parents

Place of Residence of Children	Negroes and Whites								Race: Negroes								Race: Whites							
	Level of Social Participation of the Parents																							
	Low		Moderate		High		Total		Low		Moderate		High		Total		Low		Moderate		High		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
In the Same Community in Mississippi as Parents	23	21	22	12	13	11	58	17	14	19	18	15	12	18	44	17	9	25	4	7	1	2	14	9
In the Same County of Mississippi as Parents	14	13	9	5	8	6	31	8	6	8	5	4	3	5	14	6	8	22	4	7	5	9	17	11
In Another County in Mississippi	27	25	51	29	26	22	104	25	15	21	17	14	5	7	37	14	12	33	34	56	21	39	67	45
In Another State	45	41	97	54	73	61	215	50	38	52	79	67	46	70	163	63	7	20	18	30	27	50	52	35
Total	109	100	179	100	120	100	408	100	73	100	119	100	66	100	258	100	36	100	60	100	54	100	150	100
	4 No Information								4 No Information															

Gamma = .2213
Z = 3.3309
P < .001

Gamma = .1610
Z = 1.8124
P < .05

Gamma = .4491
Z = 4.3361
P < .001

TABLE 8

Geographic Mobility of Children by Childrens' Education and Social Participation of Parents

Geographic Mobility of Children	Education Levels of Children: 0-9 Years of Education — Levels of Social Participation of Parents: Low N	Low %	Moderate N	Moderate %	High N	High %	Total N	Total %	10 Years of Education or Above — Low N	Low %	Moderate N	Moderate %	High N	High %	Total N	Total %
In the Same Community as Parents	13	25	16	21	8	32	37	24	10	18	6	6	5	5	21	9
In the Same County in Mississippi as Parents	10	19	6	8	6	24	22	14	4	7	3	3	2	2	9	3
In Another County in Mississippi	13	25	16	21	5	20	34	22	14	25	35	35	21	22	70	28
In Another State	17	31	40	50	6	24	63	40	28	50	57	56	67	71	152	60
Total	53	100	78	100	25	100	156	100	56	100	101	100	95	100	252	100

4 No Information on Education or Geographic Mobility

Gamma = .0037
Z = .0126
P > .05

Gamma = .2859
Z = 3.0722
P < .01

TABLE H

Geographic Mobility of Children Over 18 Years Old
by Sex and Social Participation of Parents

Place of Residence of Children	Level of Social Participation of the Parents — Male: Low N	Low %	Moderate N	Moderate %	High N	High %	Total N	Total %	Female: Low N	Low %	Moderate N	Moderate %	High N	High %	Total N	Total %
In the Same Community in Mississippi as Parents	11	18	12	13	6	11	29	14	12	25	10	12	7	11	29	14
In the Same County of Mississippi as Parents	7	12	3	3	4	8	14	7	7	15	6	7	4	6	17	8
In Another County in Mississippi	16	26	24	26	11	21	51	25	11	23	27	31	15	22	53	26
In Another State	27	44	54	58	32	60	113	54	18	37	43	50	41	61	102	52
Total	61	100	93	100	53	100	207	100	48	100	84	100	68	100	201	100
									4 No Info on Geographic Mobility							

Gamma = .1801
Z = 1.8614
P< .05

Gamma = .2752
Z = 2.9237
P< .01

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Summary

Rural, impoverished household heads who have different levels of social participation did not differ significantly in the demographic, social or economic factors they were tested on. Furthermore, they did not differ with respect to their participation levels and their degree of anomie or willingness to leave their community of residence.

However, the children of poverty parents who are participation inclined have significantly more formal education and move significantly greater distances away from their homes of origin. These findings suggest that both household head parents who are participation inclined and participation disinclined exert a significant influence on their children. Heads who participate less have children who value formal education less. Moreover, their children are more reluctant to leave their community of origin. Those who participate more have a greater mobility potential. This potential is evidenced in the increased formal education and geographic mobility of their children.

Conclusions

Clearly, the question about poverty that legislators, social scientists, educators, constituents, law enforcement agencies, and industrialists are concerned with has never been adequately answered. This question is--why given two poverty families with apparent similar material possessions and social circumstances--do some families show marked economic improvement and others continually remain in poverty?

To point out the fact that many low-income families have household heads who are female, old, or extremely young does not answer this central question. The aged who are caught in poverty will, granted, continue to be so circumstanced because they are too old to find gainful employment in industrial capacities. Many females who are household heads may continue to live below an adequate income level either because they have too many children (and thus are less attractive as marriage partners) or because they are in locations where adequate work or marriage partners are unavailable. At question is, would those in poverty, if presented with an opportunity to better themselves gainfully, be willing or able to do so? If not, will the children continue to be influenced by the same factors which affected the parent?

Why and how poverty is perpetuated is of paramount importance not only for the improvement of the poor, but also because those persons who are in more privileged positions want to see justified returns on their tax dollars--not that the advantaged or even average citizen would be wont to deny money to those who would be better equipped and willing to better themselves. The reluctance of the taxpayer to cede additional money to the poor stems in large part from the fact that no one consistent program seems

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to have been effective with regard to the alleviation of the poverty.[11] This is not to say that many programs have not had some success. The criticism is that there are no clear standards as to what constitutes adequate success.

Programs need to be developed that demonstrate to poverty families that they can succeed in society when they use different participation orientations toward life. For example, a paper by Gottesfeld and Dozier reported an empirical measurement of social-psychological change among a cohort of poor as a function of their active participation in an office of Economic Opportunity Community-Action Program. The authors found a significant decrease in feelings of powerlessness, showed an association of that decrease with length of service as an indigenous community organizer and interpreted their over-all findings to indicate that "the aims of community action programs in making the poor more hopeful and ambitious about what they could do on their own behalf were being realized."[12]

Similarly, it has been found that as the poor become community involved through action programs, activism and achievement orientation increased and parochialism decreased significantly.[13] Also, anomie, isolation, and normlessness have been found to decrease as participation increases.[14]

Most importantly, poverty parents should become acquainted with evidences (such as those in the present study) which point up that rural children who come from similar poverty backgrounds are significantly better educated if their parents participate beyond the nuclear family unit. Furthermore, these data suggest that such children are less particularistic about life in that they more often move further distances away from their homes of orientation; presumably to where better job opportunities are to be found.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

In general, the implications that can be drawn from the findings in this study are limited due to the secondary nature of the data analyzed and the small sample size.

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[11] "Born to Fail." Time, Vol. 88, 12 November 1973, p. 67.

[12] Gottesfeld, Harry, and Dozier, Gerterlyn. "Changes in Feelings of Powerlessness in a Community Action Program." Psychological Reports. 19 (December 1966): 978.

[13] Louis A. Zurcher, Jr., Poverty Warriors: The Human Experience of Planned Social Intervention (Austin, Texas: The Hogg Foundation Research Series, 1970), 182.

[14] Ibid., p. 183.

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It could not be shown that the social mobility of household heads was related to their social participation practices. This is in part due to the homogeneous nature of the population sampled. For example, many of the household heads were semi-retired or retired. Some were pensioners and others were living on social security. Due to the advanced ages of household heads and the fact that, for the most part, their occupational careers were behind them, the children were examined in order to determine what influence the social participation practices of household heads had on their educational and geographic mobility.

Because little has been done in examining the differences that exist in the social participation patterns among the impoverished, the informal participation patterns were not examined separately from the formal. This should be done in future studies. Also, the amounts of interaction household heads have with kin could have been studied separately from the amounts of interaction household heads have with non-relatives. Moreover, the memberships household heads have in formal organizations could have been studied separately from the local participation practices of household heads. Because the analysis is of a secondary nature, the occupations which household heads were engaged in for most of their lives could not be determined, nor could the values these heads placed on their children's successes in life.

If the adult children had been interviewed separately from the parents (household heads answered all questions concerning the family members), questions could have been asked of each of them regarding peer groups and the community influences. Questions could also have been asked of the children regarding what influence they felt their parents exerted over them.

The findings of the present study indicate that poverty parents who participate little with society unwillingly influence their children to become poverty victims. If this is so, we need to know how early those children are influenced adversely, whether rural children are influenced more by poverty parents than are urban children, and why some poverty parents have a high participation level and others a low level.

In general, the influence that poverty has on both the value systems and social participation practices of adults should be more adequately studied in both rural and urban America. Longitudinal studies of poverty are called for where both the adults in poverty and the children of these adults are examined at several points in time.

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